



MENTAL HEALTH LEGAL ADVISORS COMMITTEE

FREE LEGAL ASSISTANCE FOR DYS-INVOLVED YOUTH

What is MHLAC?

The Mental Health Legal Advisors Committee (MHLAC) helps children, adolescents and adults with mental health and other disabilities protect their rights and get appropriate services. We are an independent state agency of the Supreme Judicial Court that can provide advice and direct legal representation to our clients. We work with people with disabilities on a wide range of legal issues.

How has MHLAC served youth?

Through MHLAC's direct representation of youth, we advocate for basic rights and appropriate services. While our work brings us in contact with many public and private entities within the state, more and more we find that youth with disabilities are involved – to various degrees – with the juvenile justice system and Department of Youth Services (DYS).

For many years, MHLAC has worked hard for adolescents with mental health and emotional behavior problems. Our publications, *The Handbook on the Legal Rights of Minors* and *A Parent's Guide to the Department of Youth Services*, describes the rights of youth involved in DHS, with special attention to rights with respect to mental health and educational services.

Why do you need MHLAC?

Any youth charged with a criminal offense in Massachusetts has the right to an attorney to handle his or her defense. If the youth cannot afford an attorney, the court will appoint an attorney. A youth who is found guilty (usually called "delinquent" in Juvenile Court) may be placed on probation, committed to DHS, or, in rare instances, sentenced to adult prison. Generally, commitment to DHS marks the end of the representation by the attorney.

However, there are a number of legal issues that may arise following commitment including problems with the conditions of confinement, revocation of a grant of conditional liberty (like parole), or other civil matters. In certain circumstances, a public defender may be assigned to assist a DHS-committed youth on issues faced during confinement, such as the DHS proceeding to determine placement location and duration. On most occasions, however, youth face these situations unrepresented.

How can MHLAC help DHS-involved youth?

MHLAC aims to address this lack of representation of DHS-involved youth, particularly those in confinement. Youth being held in confinement in Massachusetts are disproportionately people of color.

DYS-involved youth face special problems and need individually-designed services. We have found that these youth and their families often have concerns regarding the following matters:

- Mental health assessment and care;
- Education;
- Appropriate placement;
- Rights in facilities;
- Restraint;
- Disability discrimination;
- Transition to the community.

When working with DYS-involved youth, MHLAC is able to address these multiple issues. We are especially concerned about this group's access to quality mental health and special education services. By bringing individual cases to the attention of appropriate agencies, we strive to ensure that Massachusetts is at the forefront of the delivery of best practices in mental health and education service delivery.



"MHLAC has been a great help to me and I would still be lost without their help... People listen to an attorney a lot quicker than they listen to the parent."

-MHLAC helped this father obtain services for his son who is committed to DYS.

How can I contact MHLAC?

MHLAC is a small office of attorneys that specialize in areas including mental health and education law. We work closely with our clients – communicating by phone or in person. When clients are minors, we try to work jointly with the minor and his or her family. We aim to serve low-income families and we do not charge for our services. We are especially interested in serving youth who have been confined in DYS placements and who may not have ongoing legal assistance. We have a toll-free telephone number so people in Massachusetts, including those people who are confined in facilities, can call us for free.

Please contact Judy Pisnanont at:
617-338-2345 ext. 24
800-342-9092, ext 24
e-mail: judyp@mhlac.org

We are actively seeking referrals of cases involving youth in the DYS system.
We welcome calls from youth, families, advocates and clinicians.

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